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Ed Littrell, 09:37 AM 7/28/99 , FYI... -Forwarded

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Date: Wed, 28 Jul 1999 09:37:01 -0700
From: Ed Littrell <ELITTREL@hq.dfg.ca.gov>
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X-Sender: kwadswor@cd-eso.water.ca.gov

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Date: Wed, 28 Jul 1999 08:21:11 -0700

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<bold>CALIFORNIA WATER NEWS, JULY 27, 1999

DELTA

Feds prepare plans for Delta wildlife refuge

Contra Costa Times </bold>- July 27, By Sarah Rohrs, staff writer

WALNUT GROVE -- The North Delta National Wildlife Refuge could
preserve
as much as 47,000 acres for fish and fowl and officials say it's
becoming
more than just a idea on a piece of paper.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is putting the final touches on an
environmental assessment that studies four alternatives for restoring
land with proper tidal action, thereby creating healthy habitat for
Delta
wildlife, said Tom Harvey, wildlife service refuge manager.

The plan is disturbing to some farmers, however, who say preserving wildlife could drive them out of business.

Steve Mello represents Tyler Island on the Delta Protection Commission, an agency that monitors land-use planning and other issues in the Delta. He said he fears the refuge will hurt nearby farms. Endangered species may take up housekeeping on farms and those visiting the refuge could complain about agricultural spraying and smells, Mello said.

While exact boundaries have not yet been drawn, the agency intends on creating the refuge between Sacramento and Rio Vista on land between the Sacramento River and the Solano County line.

About \$8.5 million in CalFed grants approved in 1997 and other money will go into creating the refuge.

"Our main concern is about restoring lands to tidal action," Harvey said.

"We've got a time crunch on now to get the environmental documents done, but a lot of things need to come together on how it's going to look and how it's going to be managed."

The wildlife service plans to restore land to water channels, marshes, sloughs and lakes and improve habitat for fish, such as the endangered salmon and Delta smelt. Prospect, Little Holland and Liberty islands will likely be within the boundaries.

However, Prospect's days as an island are numbered. Owned by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, it will be flooded permanently and then managed by the Department of Water Resources, said Lena Hsia, Army Corps landscape architect.

The Army finished draining Prospect Island about two weeks ago and

will
repair channels before breaching two adjacent levees. Hsia said the island needed to be completely dry to do the repairs.

Prospect Island will be within the proposed wildlife refuge, which could
have a dramatic impact on agriculture in Yolo and Solano counties, according to the Delta Protection Commission.

The federal agency plans to start buying farms and other parcels in the
fall, after the environmental document is released and public hearings are held, said John Castellano, agency biologist and planner.

Commissioners received an update on the refuge last week and told Harvey
and Castellano that they worry that Delta farmers could soon be the ones
most in need of protection.

A wildlife service report on the refuge's impact on the local agricultural economy is being revised, and will be included in the environmental assessment that members of the public will get a chance to
comment on in the fall.

Castellano said a draft economic report that concludes one alternative could result in a loss of about 213 jobs is inaccurate. He added the number of jobs that would be lost is likely many more than that.

Howard Stark, chief of the Sacramento wildlife service realty field offices, said that programs are in place to compensate cities and counties for taxes lost when the refuge is created.

Besides a possible adverse effect on the local economy, commissioners worry the refuge will give wildlife the upper hand in the Delta, thereby
marginalizing agricultural practices and harming those who make their livelihood on farms.

"As times change, agricultural values start to lose the battle against

wildlife. We look at it as a natural resource that needs to be preserved," said Pat McCarty, Stockton farmer and commission chair.

Harvey said he's well aware of the potential conflicts between wildlife and agricultural uses, and agreed with commissioners that farms are good for some birds, as they provide grass and other habitat for nests and forage. He added every effort will be made to maintain a good balance between both uses.

The wildlife service has several mechanisms to assist farmers inside the refuge, such as cash incentives to take some acres out of production, to manage other acres in ways that are beneficial to wildlife, Harvey said.

Commissioners also said they believe the public should get more time to review the environmental assessment. The current plan calls for a 30-day review of the report.

Margit Aramburu, commission executive director, said several Delta restoration efforts in the works could affect about 125,000 acres of farm land.

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